You Found Me In the Rain by bananannabeth

Series: You Can Talk To Me (aka. Karen Wheeler is a Good Mom™) [1]
Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: A little bit anyway, F/M, Fluff for Eleven and Mike, I feel bad for Karen!!! She wants to be a good mom, Post-Season/Series 02, and I'm sticking with that, and family fluff feat. Nancy too, or at least she did in Season One..., so this is her figuring some stuff out
Language: English
Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Karen Wheeler, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler
Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler
Status: Completed
Published: 2017-12-03
Updated: 2017-12-03
Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:08:33
Rating: General Audiences
Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply
Chapters: 1
Words: 3,944
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

Jane 'El' Hopper is new to Hawkins, but when she shows up on the Wheelers' doorstep in the middle of a storm Karen gets the feeling that she's seen her somewhere before.

You Found Me In the Rain

Author's Note:

> There aren't enough works exploring Karen's reactions to the changes in her kids, so this is my contribution to that. Just a take on how things might pan out, when it's safe for El to come out of hiding.

The wind was howling so loud that Karen barely heard the knock on the door. And when she did hear it, she thought that she'd imagined it. It was freezing cold outside, raining sideways, and although the storm had rolled in suddenly, no one should have been out in that weather. But then the knock sounded again, slightly more insistent and with a distinct pattern to it, this time.

Elbow deep in dish-water, Karen called out, "Ted, can you get that?"

There was, of course, no answer, apart from a soft snore.

Karen sighed and tried again, "Nancy? Mike? Can one of you get the door?"

Again, no response.

The knock came again, that same pattern, and Karen slid her hands out of her gloves with a sigh. She padded out of the kitchen but was beaten by Mike, who jumped over the last three stairs in one bound and ran to the door, wrenching it open.

A gust of cold air blew through the house.

“El!” he exclaimed, grabbing the arms of the small figure huddled on their landing and pulling her inside, kicking the door shut behind her. “I didn’t know you were coming over today! Why are you out in the rain? Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

Karen paused in the arch just before the entrance hall, slightly stunned by the speed of her son’s questioning.

El - official name Jane El Hopper, the mystery girl who had shown up a few weeks prior and was suddenly all that Mike could talk about - looked a little stunned as well. She was always quiet, but she seemed to take even longer than usual to process the barrage of questions Mike had thrown at her as she stood just inside the door, rain water dripping off her coat and her hair and onto the floor.

Mike had worked himself up into a bit of a frenzy, staring intently into her big brown eyes and asking, “Why didn’t you just unlock the door? You can do that, you know, instead of standing out in the rain. I’ll explain -”

“Hopper says,” El began, but was interrupted by a sneeze. She shook her head and tried again, “Hopper says I have to knock. To let people know. No -” She sneezed again, more violently this time, “No

breaking and entering."

"It's not breaking and entering if you unlock the door," Mike countered, pulling a Kleenex out of his pocket and handing it to her with practiced ease. "And you don't have to worry, if anyone saw it'd probably just be Nancy, or my mom, and Mom would probably understand -"

"Mom would probably understand what?" Karen said, halting him in his tracks.

Both of them turned to look at her, eyes wide. Evidently, neither had realised she was standing behind them.

"Uh…" Mike began, glancing at El out of the corner of his eye. "You would understand that…"

El sneezed again, loud enough this time to cause Ted to stir in his Lay-Z-Boy.

"Oh, gosh, you poor thing." Karen walked towards them, sternness immediately dropped for sympathy. "Look at you, you're soaked through."

El shifted under her gaze, stiffening slightly when Karen reached out a hand towards her.

“It’s okay,” Mike reassured her, grabbing her hand. “Mom’ll help. Won’t you, Mom?”

He looked up at her then, wearing an expression she didn’t recognise. Equal parts pleading and warning. It made him look much older than he was.

Karen returned the look with one of her own, one that said, *‘Don’t think we won’t be talking about this later, Michael* .’ But when she turned to El her expression was soft.

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “First we need to get you out of those wet clothes.”

Slowly, El nodded.

Before Karen could say anything else, Mike was speaking at a million miles an hour again. “I’ll go get my sweatpants and a new sweater for you. Soft, okay?”

El nodded again, drawing her bottom lip up between her teeth.

Karen didn’t miss how Mike squeezed her hand before letting go, shouting out, “I’ll be right back!” as he bounded up the stairs.

El didn’t say anything to break the sudden silence. She kept her head down, gaze averted, and wrung her hands together in front of her.

Even though she was spending more and more time at the Wheelers' these days, El never really seemed to say all that much to anyone apart from Mike.

No one else seemed frustrated by this in the same way Karen was: the boys included her in all of their games, explaining the rules to her with a patience she hadn't realised any of them (except for maybe Will) were even capable of; Nancy happily carried on one-sided conversations with the girl, content with smiles and nods and single words for responses; even Jonathon seemed somewhat relaxed around El, and Jonathon was one of the shyest people Karen had ever met.

Karen cleared her throat. "Why don't we hang your coat up here?" she said, gesturing to the coat rack.

El responded faster than she'd been expecting. She hurriedly shrugged out of the coat, stretching up to hang it on the hook before resuming her previous position.

"Shoes?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, yes, you can leave them here, too," Karen quickly said, glad that the girl had initiated something, even if it was just one word.

El was just toeing out of her shoes when Mike came running back down the stairs, arms full of a dark blue and gray bundle. "Here you go!" he said, holding the clothes out towards her.

She took them with a small smile, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

Mike smiled back, slightly dopey, and Karen felt a pang of panic. She'd suspected, of course, that El was more than a friend to Mike - and this wasn't the first time she'd seen them act like this around each other. But it was the first time she'd been close enough to see the dusting of pink that covered her son's cheeks, or the way that El's eyes lit up when he smiled at her.

"You, uh, you can get changed in here." Mike led her down the hall to the guest bathroom. Karen followed, not wanting Mike to slip away before she got a chance to speak to him. El stepped into the bathroom, but Mike didn't step away. "And leave your wet clothes on the tub, so they can dry a little, I guess. I'm, uh, I'm going to close the door," he said, and Karen's eyes widened. He flashed her a quick glance, looking panicked, before turning back to El. "But I'll be just out here, okay? I'll be waiting right outside."

El said something in response, too quiet for Karen to hear, but it made Mike blush again as he gently shut the door. The blush intensified when he looked up at his mom.

"Michael Wheeler," Karen began, quietly enough so that El wouldn't hear but stern enough so that Mike knew she meant business, "What exactly is going on here?"

"Mom," he hissed, throwing a nervous glance at the bathroom door. "Can we talk about this later?"

“Your friends can’t just show up here out of the blue -”

“My friends show up here all the time without you knowing!”

Oh, God, when had he started talking back? “I know your other friends, Mike, I don’t know El -”

“Well you should get to know her, because she’s awesome, and she’s not going anywhere.” The strength with which he said that, the absolute certainty behind the statement, floored her for a second. Maybe this was more than the little crush she’d thought it was.

Karen shook her head, trying to stay on topic. “And your other friends aren’t girls -”

“Mom!” Mike looked absolutely mortified. “Oh my god.”

“Michael, this is serious, I think we need to lay some ground rules -”

A sneeze came from the bathroom just before the door opened and El stepped out in Mike’s old clothes.

His attention immediately shifted to her, Karen all but forgotten. “Better?”

El smiled. “Better.”

“Come on, let’s go -”

“Uhuh.” Karen held out a hand to prevent Mike from running off down the hall. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“But Mom!”

“El, sweetheart,” she said, looking over her son’s shoulder. El looked a little uncomfortable at being directly addressed, but quickly straightened her shoulders and held Karen’s gaze. “Does your dad know that you’re here?”

There was a slight pause before El answered, “No.”

“We need to call him then, to let him know that you’re safe. Is he at the Station?”

Karen had been more than a little surprised when rumours had started circulating that Chief Hopper had an illegitimate daughter who had just moved to town, and even more surprised when he’d dropped said daughter off at her house the very first Saturday after the rumours had started circulating, apologising for adding another one to the bunch of kids that called the Wheeler basement home.

But Karen was nothing if not polite, and so she had gracefully

accepted this turn of events without question, and she'd seen how grateful Hopper was for it.

"Yes," El said. "I was going to meet him there. After studying at Dustin's."

"Did something happen?" Mike asked seriously. "On the way there, I mean?"

El looked pensive. "It started to rain."

Karen saw the weight lift off Mike's shoulders as he exhaled. "Oh, and you didn't want to ride your bike in the rain?"

She spoke in that short hand the two of them seemed to have, conveying only the most pertinent information and skipping most of the context. "Your house was closer."

"Okay," Karen said, and both children turned to look at her. "Well, let's go call Chief Hopper and let him know you're here, and then when it stops raining Nancy'll give you a ride to the station."

"Nancy?" El asked hopefully.

"El can stay?" Mike asked at the same time, with even more hope than El.

“Until it stops raining,” Karen clarified.

“Who’s calling out to me?” Nancy asked, poking her head around the top of the stairs. “Oh, hey, El.”

El beamed up at her, waving shyly.

Nancy smiled back and descended the stairs. “I didn’t know you were coming over today,” she said, flashing a pointed look at Mike.

Mike raised his eyebrows at her. “Yeah, it was a surprise. Because of the rain. We’re just gonna call Hopper now and then -” Here he turned to El, taking her hand in his again, “ - then I can show you the new comic Lucas gave me last week after I beat him on that Science test -”

“You’re such a little nerd,” Nancy said, but it was fond, lacking all of the resentment that had been all too common between the two eldest Wheeler siblings for a while there.

“Shut up,” Mike mumbled, scuffing his socked toes against the carpet.

“Nerd,” El repeated, but it sounded a little like she was just testing the word out.

Mike looked up at her, shocked, and Nancy laughed. “See, El agrees with me.”

El’s conversation with Hopper was brief. She didn’t say much, just a quick explanation of the situation followed by, “Nancy,” and a few “yes”s, but when she hung up she was smiling.

“I can stay,” she said, and Mike whooped.

“Awesome! Let’s -”

But his thought was interrupted by El sneezing again, once, twice, three times in a row. When she finally stopped she looked thoroughly put out.

“I think El should probably get some rest,” Karen said.

She’d been expecting a string of protests from Mike, but instead he nodded, looking at El with concern. “You sound like you’re getting a cold.”

“I am cold,” she said seriously.

“No, not that type of cold. When you have a cold, you’re sick, like

you can't stop sneezing and your head feels funny and you feel tired. Is that what you feel like?"

Karen wondered what type of child didn't know what a cold was. She stared at El, watched her think about Mike's words before nodding seriously, and something twinged at the back of Karen's memories.

She decided to focus on the most important thing, first, though. "I'll warm you up a hot water bottle, and Mike can get you some more blankets."

"Fort?" El asked.

"Yeah, we can go in the blanket fort if you want," Mike said breezily, but at their words that memory of Karen's began to solidify.

She remembered the government people sliding a file over to her and Ted, the serious face of a young girl with a shaved head staring up at them. She remembered a mess of blankets in the basement, the strands of fake blonde hair she'd found down there. She remembered Mike's insistence over the next twelve months that the fort remain standing, that they couldn't tear it down no matter how much Holly wanted that particular blanket, because it was *important, okay,* he couldn't explain why, it just was.

She remembered how sullen and angry her son had been, right up until the moment that El came to town.

“Mom?” Nancy asked, eyes narrowed over the brim of her cup of coffee. “Are you okay?”

“I’m -” Karen took a deep breath. All three teenagers were staring at her, brows creased in concern. “When did you move to Hawkins again, El?”

El’s expression closed off immediately. She’d meant it as a defense mechanism, Karen could tell, but all it did was increase her resemblance to Karen’s memory of the girl in the photo. “Two months ago.”

Karen didn’t miss the panicked look Mike and Nancy shared. She tried to keep her voice steady and casual as she asked, “And how did you and Mike meet again?”

“Mom, this is embarrassing -” Mike began whining, but she cut him off.

“Don’t interrupt, Mike, it’s rude,” she said. “Sorry, El.”

El looked frantically between Nancy and Mike, who both looked just as lost. Her children were great at many things, but acting was not one of them.

“We met at school,” El eventually recited. “On the first day.”

“You’ve become such good friends in such a short time -”

“Mom, seriously.” Nancy was trying now. “Don’t embarrass Mike in front of El -”

“I’m not embarrassing anyone,” Karen said innocently. “You just look very familiar, that’s all.”

“You’re probably just getting El confused with someone,” Mike said.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

All three children looked mortified. She decided to put them out of their misery. “Okay, okay, why don’t you two go downstairs? I’ll bring down the hot water bottle when it’s ready.”

Mike grabbed El’s hand and they ran for the basement before she’d even finished speaking.

Nancy’s shoulders sagged and she leant back against the counter.

“Nancy?” Karen asked.

She straightened immediately, fingers tightening around her cup. “Y-Yes, Mom?”

“Can you do me a favor and go and check on Holly, please?”

Nancy looked relieved. She put her cup down on the bench and smiled. “Sure thing.”

Karen waited until she was out of earshot before grabbing the phone and re-dialling the station. “Hi Flo, it’s Karen Wheeler. Is Chief Hopper there? I really need to speak to him.”

She could hear Mike and El’s murmured voices from the top of the basement stairs, but as soon as she took one step down they fell silent; apart from a single sneeze from El. By the time she made it to the foot of the stairs they were completely focused on the board game they had set up between them. El was sitting inside the blanket fort, Mike just outside it, and Karen wondered how many times this scene had happened before, without her even knowing.

“Here’s a hot water bottle for you, El,” she said, holding it out.

Mike took it from her and passed it over. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Thank you,” El said, hugging it to her.

They sounded genuine, and Karen smiled. She considered leaving it at that, but then decided that it would be best to give them some warning. “There’s been a change of plans, too.”

Mike spun around to look at her and El froze with the water bottle half-tucked under her sweater.

“Change of plans?” Mike asked.

“Yes. Nancy’s not going to take El to the station. Chief Hopper’s coming here, instead.”

El dropped the water bottle into her lap. “Hopper’s coming here?”

“What for?” Mike asked.

“I have a few things I want to talk to him about -”

“Mom, seriously, that’s not -”

“It’s happening, Mike, whether you like it or not,” she said, holding up a hand.

He fell silent but didn’t look happy about it.

“Mrs. Wheeler,” El began cautiously, staring intensely up at her. “Am I in trouble?”

Karen’s worries intensified at how small El sounded when she asked that, and how scared Mike looked at the prospect. She shook her head. “No, El, you’re not in trouble.”

“Promise?” she asked quietly.

Karen glanced at Mike, who was looking between the two of them with a frown. Something about this seemed very important - Karen got the sense that whatever she said next would solidify El’s opinion of her for a very long time.

“I promise that you’re not in trouble,” she said.

El looked appeased, but Mike looked just as worried.

When Karen started heading back up the stairs, he mumbled something to El and then followed after her, catching her just at the top.

“Mom,” he said, grabbing her wrist.

Karen froze, looking across at him. He’d shot up so much over the

past few months that even though he was standing two steps below her, he was almost as tall as her. “Mike?”

“Promises are really important to El,” he said, voice low. “You promised that she wasn’t in trouble, but I need to know - did you mean it?”

Karen gently put her hand over his on her wrist. “You said that I should get to know El better, and that's all I'm trying to do. I meant it, Mike. She’s not in trouble, and neither are you. "

Despite her reassurances, however, both El and Mike looked like a bundle of nerves when Chief Hopper appeared at the Wheelers’ front door at 5.15. They hovered just around the corner, probably thinking that the adults couldn’t see them, watching as Karen greeted Hopper warmly and he hung his hat and jacket on the rack, next to El’s still damp coat.

“What can I do for you, Mrs Wheeler?” Hopper asked, giving her a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

For the first time, Karen had some doubts about what she was about to do. She cleared her throat. “Can we - uh, can we talk? I have some - questions.”

Hopper’s expression tightened, but he nodded. “Okay. Lead the way.”

It was only when they were settled around the dining room table, and only once El's sneeze had given them away anyway, that El and Mike stepped properly into the room.

"Hey, kid, you feeling okay?" Hopper said, reaching out to ruffle El's hair. She smiled at him, swatting his hand away. He nodded once at Mike in greeting. "Wheeler."

"Hey, Chief," Mike greeted with a familiarity Karen hadn't been expecting, curling his hands around the back of one of the dining chairs. He glanced over at Karen and swallowed. "Is it okay if we…"

He let the sentence fall away, but everyone knew how it ended.

She should have anticipated this.

Hopper looked at her, as if gauging her reaction. Karen wasn't sure what he saw, but he sighed and said, "Yeah, sure."

El and Mike both pulled out chairs, the legs scraping against the floor, and Nancy came hurrying down the stairs. Karen thought for sure she was going to bolt out the front door, yelling something about going to visit Jonathon, but instead she skidded to a stop at the table and took the seat next to El.

"I'm not late, am I?" she asked, glancing around the table.

Mike rolled his eyes, and the Chief looked stony faced, but El giggled. “No,” she said, “Not late.”

Nancy smiled at her, before meeting Karen’s eye and shrinking down in her seat, looking away guiltily.

“What is going on here?” Karen finally asked, splaying her palms on the table top. “Why do I feel like all of you know something that I don’t?”

“Because we do,” Mike muttered, but the Chief glared at him and he quickly shut up.

He turned back to face Karen, clearly in cop mode. “Mrs Wheeler -”

“Karen,” she interrupted, ever the good hostess.

“Karen,” Hopper tried again. He took a deep breath, started to say something, and then turned to Mike instead. “You’ve checked the whole place?”

“Every bulb,” Mike answered confidently, which made absolutely no sense to Karen but seemed to make perfect sense to Hopper.

He turned back to Karen and asked, “What do you already know?”

That wasn't what she'd been expecting. Karen leant back in her chair, surveying the group in front of her. Her gaze settled on El, who was staring right back at her, and her determination solidified.

"I know that El is the girl." She dropped her voice low, some residual fear of being watched still lingering. "The one they were looking for, those government people."

No one responded for a while, but when they did, they did it all at once.

"You can't believe anything they said! Mom, they were evil, they were trying to hurt El, and me -"

"We didn't mean to lie to you, Mom, but it was for your own safety!"

"You can't tell anyone about this." Hopper spoke clearly over the top of her children, full of all the authority you'd expect a Chief of Police to have. "For our sake and yours, you cannot tell *anyone* about this."

Karen put a hand over her heart, mortified. "You think I haven't figured that out already?"

Nancy hugged herself, while Mike just gaped.

Karen leaned forward, arms on the table, trying to show them just how sincere she was. “El is obviously not who they insinuated she was.”

El mouthed the word ‘insinuated’ to herself.

“And she obviously makes Mike happy, so I don’t - I don’t want her to go anywhere, or to put her in danger.” Karen pushed her hair back off her forehead and sighed. “I just - I miss being able to talk to my kids. I miss knowing what’s going on with them. I just want to know the truth. I can’t keep them safe if I don’t know the truth.”

El finally spoke. She mimicked Karen’s pose, both arms flat on the table, hands splayed, open and honest. “Friends don’t lie.”

Mike grabbed her hand. “This is different, El, this is -”

“No,” she said firmly, looking at him, and then at Hopper. “Friends. Don’t. Lie.”

Karen felt oddly touched at the absolute certainty in El’s statement. The thought that she might be considered a friend warmed her heart.

“I wish you hadn’t taught her that, kid,” Hopper said, rubbing his brow. But when he looked up at Karen, she could have sworn he was almost smiling.

“Friends?” Karen asked, and she was surprised when her voice came out in a whisper.

“Friends,” El said, reaching across and grasping Karen’s hand with her spare one.

Nancy laughed, disbelieving. “Oh, wow.”

“Okay,” Mike said, and then again. “Okay. Okay! Well, uh, then, I guess - We start…?”

“In the rain,” El said, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. “You found me in the rain.”